



Page 86

## 86 An Abstract World

The French sculptor Agnès Debizet populates every nook of her rustic estate southeast of Paris with her fantastical forms.

By Gisela Williams

Photographs by Ilyes Griyeb

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al exorcism. I often think of  
cription of how she felt writing  
Men We Reaped," which tells  
the author's childhood in  
rney to becoming a writer —  
der, the other — the deaths of  
and friends — in reverse,  
converging at their emotional  
self and the expressive self  
I join: "You hear about bones  
ken and reset so they can heal  
and that's the way I think  
moir did to me," Ward explained  
with The Writer magazine.  
of, of course, because you can't  
ied, but I'm hoping that they  
ner."

IDENTIFICATION with the  
point that it — inevitably —  
link of my queer and trans  
ds who were galvanized by  
he Argonauts," even where  
d from hers. What they found,  
cknowledgment of their  
model of a certain way of being  
le of interrogating the thing one  
xperiencing — in Nelson's case,  
with her gender-fluid partner,  
ing at the same time the author  
t open questioning allowed  
takes, for imperfection, for the  
ion that might, in fact, enlarge  
r new book, "On Freedom:  
e and Constraint," released  
oved away from memoir.)  
the time "The Argonauts" was  
d in recognition when Nelson  
ething inherently queer about  
nsofar as it profoundly alters  
te, and occasions a radical  
nd radical alienation from —  
an an experience so profoundly  
nd transformative also  
t the ultimate conformity?"  
as a strangely doubled effect,  
g and making accessible entire  
, immersing us in another soul  
yping us to do without them,  
orm often do, opening our eyes  
"I'll never unfeel and ways of  
er unthink, they have a way  
is. In making a case for our  
terity, they make us legible,  
"normal." In pursuit of internal  
ch across the aisle. Nelson  
ay in which people will identify  
"I don't want to represent  
ame time, every word that I write  
ome kind of defense, or assertion  
ver it is that I am, whatever  
at I ostensibly have to offer,  
ed. . . . That's part of the horror  
riting. There is nowhere to  
o, is part of our human paradox:  
seen as individual, we find  
spite our fear of judgment, our  
revails. ▀

# AN ABSTRACT WORLD

On a 19th-century farm outside of Paris, the French ceramic artist Agnès Debizet has built a creative retreat — and a home for her life's work.

By Gisela Williams Photographs by Ilyes Griyeb



In Agnès Debizet's studio, formerly a cow stable, a group of large, recently completed sculptures.

AS YOU PASS through the cast-iron gates that lead to the artist Agnès Debizet's country studio on an old farm in the French village of Saint-Maurice-aux-Riches-Hommes, it can feel that you're entering another world altogether. Ninety minutes northwest is Paris, where Debizet, 63, owns an apartment in the Marais, but here, across a group of 19th-century farm buildings that surround a grassy courtyard, are more than 150 sculptures from her 40-year-long career. Inside the courtyard sits "Évolution" (2007-15), a monumental installation of approximately 40 stoneware sculptures that gradually increase in size, from one that resembles an ostrich egg to eight-foot towers that recall morel mushrooms, all a sun-bleached white with a porous, coral-like texture. Currently, the work is arranged in a circle surrounding a linden tree, but Debizet is constantly changing its configuration (a snaking line, a chaotic pile), something she does with the majority of her creations.

Aside from the ceramics classes she took in Paris in the 1980s, Debizet is almost completely self-taught. "I didn't fit in the traditional ceramics scene, and without a degree from the École des Beaux-Arts, I wasn't really accepted in France as an artist," she says. In the early stages of her career, Debizet sculpted while raising four children, who often claimed her figures as toys — a particular favorite was



an earthenware sculpture in the shape of an old-fashioned TV covered with tiny faces. "I knew from the first moment I had clay in my hands that, with it, I could create all that I wanted," she says. Over time, she developed a distinctive technique that has come to define her work: She paints black earthenware slip into cracks and imperfections in the porcelain glaze of her stoneware sculptures, producing a raku-like effect. These fractures are a result of the exceptionally high temperature at which Debizet fires her work, which can cause splinters and even explosions in the kiln. These spontaneous mishaps have become Debizet's signature. "I'm always tweaking, making mistakes and trying again," she says. "In a way, these layers of uncertainty and error are my artistic identity." When her gallerist Victor Gastou, of the venerable Paris-based Yves Gastou Gallery, first saw her body of work, he was struck by its singularity. "I immediately understood that I was in the completely unique universe of an artist who was making her own world," he says.

DEBIZET'S TEXTURED FORMS occupy every corner of the estate, from the gardens to the interiors of the property's six houses — her atelier, living quarters and four outbuildings. Her first work, from 1981, of a dragon craning its neck, is enclosed within a rusted rabbit cage; nearby are human-size towers covered in hundreds of little white faces, and a monumental figure that looks like Nike of Samothrace sitting on tree roots. In Debizet's studio, a former cow stable with



Above: outside the workshop, elements from Debizet's "Évolution" installation, created between 2007 and 2015. Left: in the artist's Paris apartment-atelier, "Migrant II," a black stoneware sculpture from 2005, next to collages and other projects.



To watch Agnès Debizet make a sculptural ceramic lamp, visit [tmagazine.com](http://tmagazine.com).

lofty exposed wood-beam ceilings, everything from amoebic shapes to larger faunalike silhouettes are in various stages of development.

Between Debizet's ceramics atelier and her cozy four-bedroom clapboard cottage, which is painted in shades of olive, clementine and parchment, the backyard garden displays a cluster of large-scale pieces: A ring of green-glazed stalactite-shaped forms rise from the ground. Another work, at the edge of the lawn, depicts an upside-down tree trunk, its roots growing toward the sky, while under a large maple tree, a rust-colored head of a man rests atop a pedestal. While many of the property's sculptures are constantly in motion, being replanted and reinvigorated, the man's head, gazing upward at the maple, has remained untouched for years. "They have been having an interesting conversation for so long," says Debizet of the head and the nearby tree. "I couldn't possibly separate them." ▀